Teaching of a foreign language will be identified under two headings: 1. teaching of the skills of a language (functional) and 2. teaching of the information-content structure of the language (formal). In any foreign language teaching programme, one has to give importance to the four basic skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. These can be mastered only by application of these particular skills in actual communication situations. Indian students rarely get the opportunity to put into practice the skills of listening and speaking in actual communication situation as well as in a curriculum set up and so we cannot hope to develop in students linguistic competence in English which is on par with that of the native speakers. But it is not so in the case of the skills of reading and writing. Our learners can always be exposed to written communication situations where these two skills are used naturally. Therefore, through reading good English, one can develop such an insight into the working of the language and even hope to surpass the native speaker so far as these two skills are concerned. Reading, therefore, is the key factor for the development of communicative competence in English for Indian learners in the absence of favourable spoken environment facilitating the development of oral skills.
Reading means, reading with comprehension. otherwise, it is only barking at the print. The analysis of the English language syllabus in schools of Tamil Nadu right from class VI to XII shows that the syllabus gives importance to the skill of reading, especially to reading comprehension.

This study is undertaken to find out the degree of realization of the prescribed objectives with regards to the development of the reading comprehension skill at the Higher Secondary level.

Some hypotheses were formulated for verification in the present dissertation. They are:

1. A good mechanics of reading among students leads to a greater degree of comprehension.
2. Degree of exposure to language has a role to play in comprehension.
3. Social parameters associated with learners have some role to play over the degree of comprehension the learners achieve or manifest.

To test the above said hypotheses, three tests were conducted and the results were analysed. To test the first hypothesis (i.e.) a good mechanics of reading among students leads to a greater degree of comprehension, some students were asked to read a text loudly and their reading was recorded. Two
aspects were given importance while analysing the recorded reading: 1. vocabulary recognition and pronunciation and 2. pauses adopted by students for indicating sense group of words.

With reference to vocabulary recognition and pronunciation the following were found out:

1. They substitute a word in the place of other words which are similar in one or two letters.
2. They distort the pronunciation of some words. They pronounce them adopting spelling pronunciation technique.
3. They are unable to differentiate 'voiceless' and 'voiced' plosives.
4. Due to wrong assumption, wrong sight based inference about words are made.

These findings clearly show that the children are very poor in their pronunciation and have a very poor vocabulary stock.

The same reading material was subjected to a second analysis, to find out how good students can read meaningfully, adopting meaningful pauses after each sense groups of words. The following facts were revealed from it:

1. The students have problems in making ideational
cuttings while reading. This leads to their poor comprehension ability. Their reading is mechanical and is not governed by the purpose of comprehending. This clearly shows that the students are not trained in the mechanics of reading.

To verify the second hypothesis namely, if degree of exposure to language plays any important role in comprehension, a test was administered and the results of the analysis revealed the following facts. They are:

1. Students manifest better degree of comprehension of the passages in their mother tongue i.e., Tamil than in English.

2. They have not transferred the strategy they follow with Tamil to English.

They can only reproduce the answer as it is from the text and cannot modify it to suit the question asked. As for as English language is concerned they could not manipulate the language. They could do it with reference to Tamil. But they have not transferred that strategy to English.

Only on comparison, we could say that the student's comprehension ability is better in their mother tongue than in English. But in isolation, their competence in Tamil too is poor. They could not manipulate the language. There is no 100 per cent competence in Tamil too. So attention should be given
To verify the third hypothesis relating to students' competence in their comprehension subskills and the role of social parameters over the degree of comprehension, a test was conducted and the data were subjected to descriptive and differential analysis and the following facts were observed from descriptive analysis.

1. The students can locate the answers in a passage only when they are explicitly stated. They have failed if they were expected to scrutinize the text to lift the answer. They tend to follow the cue of locating the identical words both in the text and in the question and based on that cue, answers were lifted.

This clearly indicates that their answering is strategic but not based on comprehension. Their reading is only mechanical. This again shows the lack of training in the art of manipulating the language and the texts. We treat language as a subject rather than as a skill. This basic failure in our language curriculum has paved the way for the poor competence among students leading to the lack in the ability to manipulate the language as and when required.

Another type of analysis namely differential analysis
based on the parameters, area, sex, achievement level and economy had given out the following results.

1. Area when controlled, sex does not play a role over comprehension ability.

2. Socio-economic status is important with reference to females and not with males.

3. The students belonging to high achievement group show better comprehension ability than the students belonging to low achievement group.

4. The students of urban area manifest better comprehension ability than the students of rural area.

The students' competence in the subskill of comprehension namely, recognition, re-organisation, inference, recall and evaluation when analysed had given the following findings.

1. Students are better in recognition skill than the other types of subskills.

1a. But the degree of competence depended on the availability of the answers in the passage. If the answers were explicitly stated they found it easy to lift up the answers. But at the same time, if the answers were scattered throughout the passage and required certain degree of scrutiny, they found it difficult to answer.
1b. The novelty of the passage too had its own implications. Narrative style did not pose any difficulty. But passages like, matching table and tabular passage had given them difficulty in answering.

2. Next to recognition skill comes the re-organisation skill in the hierarchy of achievement level index. Here too, they are not so competent when the concept is related to science and unrelated to their domain of experience.

3. The rest of the subskills namely, recall, inference and evaluation seemed to be beyond their comprehension ability. These skills require activisation of their cognitive ability and hence they have failed miserably in all these areas.

All these shortcomings can be attributed to the lack of training rather than to the student's ability. We quite often forget that in India, we teach English as a second language.

The second language learner is, however, at a disadvantage with regard to the quantity, quality and nature of the input he receives. His exposure to the target language and the opportunity to use it are severely restricted by factors such as time, motivation, need, etc. The input, the first language learner gets automatically and plentifully in his environment and also the opportunity he has to consolidate it, is lacking in the case of the second language learner and therefore, it has to be
artificially provided in the classroom.

In the present state of affairs, the reading materials provided, the selection provided therein are inadequate, improper either with high flown and bombastic in style or highly technical in style with strange and difficult concepts and words crammed in them. Sometimes themes are so alien so that even comprehension becomes problematic. The selections sometimes have no relation to the reader's academic or social life. The emphasis on the comprehension of the ideas and the acquisition of language is totally ignored.

The majority of our English teachers also find it difficult to teach English due to many factors. In our State Board schools, the government appoints specially trained teachers to handle the first language but allows teachers who have just studied English as a second language upto X standard without any special training to teach English right from standard III. They teach English along with other subjects. So, they cannot give full justice to teach English as a skill. They give importance only to the content rather than to the application part of a language.

Moreover, our examination system gives importance to the evaluation of the amount of content of the text a learner learned and not for the skill he obtained for using the language. They encourage the students to have rote learning rather than on
their production skill. To put it in another way, the curriculum does not teach the way we ought to teach and also we do not test in the way we ought to test as for as the second language is concerned. We say that our objective is acquisition of language but our text books, our classroom practices, our teachers do not characterise it. A revision with due emphasis given to skill development is the need of the day. Conscious attention to language and repeated meaningful reproduction of effective expressions of ideas are the activities that should characterize second language classroom practices. The target item to be taught should be units that would be used for expressing the given ideas, rather than the ideas themselves.

When we have decided to treat English as a 'Library Language', due importance should be given to the skill of reading. Allowance for separate reading classes may be made wherein reading training and practice can be given. Training should be given to read meaningfully following the meaningful sense groups. They should also be trained so that the students can recognize, re-organise, infer, recall evaluate and appreciate whatever be the material given or whichever be the circumstances presented.
Strategies identified

From the test results it is very clear that the students are not proficient enough to handle English language, even after learning English for a minimum period of 9 years. From the results of the analysis, it is found that they follow some strategies to answer the questions related to reading comprehension. Some such strategies noted are:

1. Taking the cue words both from the question asked and the passage given for reading.

2. Lifting up materials as such from the passage under some assumptions about the distribution of the answers in the passage and without giving consideration to the relevancy of the materials lifted.

3. Verbatim reproduction of the materials from the passage.

Cue word strategy

From the responses given by the students, it is very clear that they take little pain in comprehending the text to answer the questions asked. They in fact, search for the occurrence of same words both in the question and the reading passage as cues and reproduce the sentences containing similar words as answers.

Lifting strategy

Students assume that the answer to the first question should be in the first paragraph and subsequent lines of texts
are answers to the subsequent questions asked. Being governed by this assumption, they just take some lines from the passage and write them as answers to the questions asked without minding the appropriateness of such lines as answers.

Reproduction strategy

It is also found that students normally do not keep in mind the notions of tense, voice, etc. of the structures they draw from the passage and modify them so as to make them suitable to the questions asked. Instead they simply reproduce some portions of the reading material as such, as answers to the questions asked.

Reasons for the adoption of strategies

The above said shortcomings are found to be with the children because enough time and methods are not given for imparting reading skills in the curriculum set up. Aptitude of children alone will not be a contributing factor for this kind of short-coming. The present curricular set up, the tendency to adopt rote learning rather than learning based on comprehension, encouragement to reproduce the answers from test passages, lack of attention to the real development of the skill of comprehension, lack of proper atmosphere wherein the children can pick up the language, treating English as a subject rather than as a language for developing skill in using it are some of the factors
contributing to the deficiency in the skills of using English in general and reading skill in particular.

The skill of reading is not given due importance. Special reading classes to develop this skill are not allocated in school curriculum.

Moreover we do not have graded reading packages to help the children to acquire this skill even when they are outside of the curricular set up.

Suggestions

An overall change in the syllabus design can be made so that it can help a balanced development of all the skills. The help of experts in second language teaching and curriculum planning may be taken in this regard.

Specially trained teachers should be used right from the lower classes to help the children to pick up the language.

The strategy of feeding the language may be avoided and provision should be made for learning the language and language skills. The teachers should be made to watch the children in the given atmosphere and the children should be taught the strategies of using language with regards to the skills chosen. Teaching content should be made secondary and illustrative of the
strategies. An atmosphere may be created for the children to pick up the rules of the language by themselves. These things should begin even in the lower primary classes and not in the higher classes.

It is felt that providing the right input, will bring out the right output. Children should be introduced to the language in a play-way method. To start with only oral exercises with the help of real objects, real situation supported by colourful pictures, etc., may be given.

The appropriate reading package with due gradation that could motivate the learner, should be developed keeping in mind the age, atmosphere and grade of the children and their purchase capacity. This will facilitate the reading habit even outside the curricular set up.

Reading comprehension should be given importance in the reading package. Interesting pictures, small questions and titbits may be provided in reading packages. Children try to comprehend the picture and then some motivation is created to give answers to the question. Care should be given to skill development from the lower classes.

In the advanced classes the reading materials should have sufficient varieties. The text need not necessarily be in a passage. It may be in a chart form, a table form or a graphic
form. This will enable the children to comprehend the text irrespective of the form it assumes. This in turn will help them to use language functionally in real world situation.

Another noteworthy point is that the children are very poor in re-organisation, recall, inference and evaluation skills. These skills are somewhat complicated ones, and hence our syllabus and teaching methods should therefore be re-oriented keeping the imparting of all these things in mind.

Reading materials should be developed to make the children proficient in all those skills. Separate reading sessions should be arranged, wherein children will be trained towards the mastery of all these skills. They should be given opportunity to express themselves in English through dialogues or role plays. There need not be an individual interview or testing to test the achievement of students in these skills. The teacher may evaluate them by their mode of expression in a given situation.

Practice is essential to handle any tool in any work. Language should also be viewed as a tool and necessary practice, training should be given to handle that tool. These practices and training should be given right from the lower standards so that when the students come to the higher secondary classes they find it easy to handle the tool. In the higher secondary level children must know how to refer books, take notes, interpret,
etc. If such a training or such an approach is developed, they can express themselves very easily, then English as a separate subject need not find a place in the higher secondary level. Higher secondary stage is a take off stage wherein one should use the language proficiently as a medium to express other subjects. So English as a language subject can very well be done away with in the higher levels of curriculum provided one is proficient and efficient in handling the tool English at lower levels. This will enable students in achieving scholastic skills at higher levels.